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THE FARM LABOURER AS A SKILLED WORKMAN

A PAPER READ BY

FREDERICK VERNEY

(A Member of the London County Council and of the Bucks County Council)

IN THE

EDUCATIONAL SECTION

AT THE

CONFERENCE

HELD IN CONNECTION WITH THE

HORTICULTURAL EXHIBITION

OF THE

Royal Botanic Society

On Tuesday, June 7th

1904

THE FARM LABOURER AS A SKILLED WORKMAN.

BY

FREDERICK VERNEY.

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On TUESDAY, JUNE 7th, 1904.

THE FARM LABOURER AS A SKILLED WORKMAN.

By FREDERICK VERNEY.

In 1851, the population of England and Wales numbered 18 millions. Of this population, nearly two millions were then engaged in agriculture.

In 1901, the population of England and Wales numbered 32½ millions, and of this population, less than one million were engaged in agricultural pursuits. In other words, about one-ninth of the whole population was engaged in agriculture in 1851, and fifty years later the proportion was diminished to less than one-thirtieth of the population.

Among the causes for this extraordinary diminution in our agricultural population there are the enormous growth of towns, the saving of labour by machinery, the facilities of transit. But these causes in combination, and others which might be mentioned, cannot be said to give a satisfactory reason for the diminution in that kind of work, which in past years has given to England a race of men and women physically and morally capable of holding their own in comparison with any men and women of the civilized world. In recent years there has been a great and growing competition for labour between the country and the towns. Speaking generally the towns have had the best of it. Farmers complain in many parts of England of the ever-growing scarcity of men and boys for farm work. A farmer's grumble is not always well and truly laid, but the evidence is conclusive that the brightest and most intelligent of our country lads and the handiest among the men are migrating from the country to the towns.

The natural attractions of town life are obvious enough—the higher wages for skilled labour, the greater facilities for buying, the interest, excitement, and fun of the town, and many another attraction that might be added. But what is not quite so obvious is that, in addition to all the natural attractions of town life, we have during recent years immensely increased with infinite trouble the artificial attractions, and that this is being done out of public money.

While the towns complain of over-population the country complains of depopulation, yet the whole tendency of public local expenditure is to increase enormously the attractiveness of urban life and its industrial prosperity—excellent objects in themselves—but the fact remains that unless efforts are made and public money is spent to increase the attractions of country life the burden of urban over-population will ever increase upon those whose money is taken and used in this way; while the losses consequent upon rural depopulation will fall on those who become less and less able to bear them, and the health and prosperity of the whole community will suffer both in town and country.

Not one word can be said against the splendid educational process now in full swing intended to put our town artisan on the intellectual level of his brethren on the Continent. But if country industries are

also to hold their own against foreign competition a similar effort must be made in their favour, and the wealth of the towns may well contribute something to make country life more attractive and country industries more lucrative to prevent the headlong rush from country to town, which is an injury to both. There is plenty of scope for skill on the farm, as well as in the workshop. A systematized form of instruction and training is as necessary in the one case as in the other.

For the sake of agriculture in England it is time that we trained the best boys on the farms as we train the best boys in the workshops, so that they may earn higher wages in cash, and get more produce in kind out of the land—whether it be the garden, the allotment, or the farm, an advantage which will be shared by the labourer, the farmer, and the landlord, and by the whole community, for everyone benefits by prosperous agriculture.

The suggestion is, not to make every farm labourer a skilled workman, but to give the best of them the same chance as is given to the best artisans.

An experienced and successful land-agent in the Midlands (it is hardly necessary to say that he is a Scotchman) has recently written a memorandum on this subject, from which the following is a quotation:

"The country is rapidly becoming depopulated, and the towns overcrowded, to a degree which calls for immediate and drastic remedies.

"Nothing would appear simpler than that some agency should be established in London, whose duty it would be to gather together masses of the able-bodied unemployed, and draft them into the country, where they would automatically drop into the places of the countrymen who have acquired a distaste for country pursuits, or have become imbued with the desire to share the seemingly greater prosperity of life in the towns.

"But this is not so simple as it looks. It is true that the countryman who seeks employment in the town finds himself, more or less, capable of turning his hand to all classes of unskilled labour. It is equally true that the average London 'out-of-work' would find himself utterly helpless if deposited in the country, and placed face to face with the apparently simple and ordinary tasks presented from day to day on a farm.

"The writer has had some experience in testing the capabilities of men who as 'failures' in town have been induced to try their fortunes in the country; and the trials have invariably resulted in emphasizing these 'failures,' and showing how untenable is the idea held in many quarters that the solving of this problem is to be found in bringing the country employer of labour into touch with the unemployed in the towns. Here is a case in point. A man, fairly strong and sound, and of some intelligence, judging from the glibness of his talk, was engaged to start work at a dairy farm about 50 miles from London. A deal of trouble was taken to make this man feel that he had fallen among friends. Comfortable lodgings were taken for him. The farmer who engaged him agreed that his work for a time should not be laborious, and that moderate shortcomings should be mercifully ignored. The month was July, and haymaking was in progress. The job selected for

the newcomer was the easiest in this branch of work, namely, swaith turning. He was placed in the rear of his fellow-workers, in case their pace should prove too much for him; they very soon, however, passed round the field and made up to him, necessitating his again being placed in the rear. After two hours' work the glibness of speech, which was noticeable earlier in the day, had entirely disappeared, and another hour saw him sitting under the hedge groaning over aching muscles, and lamenting the fate which lured him to such a place. To make a long story short, he returned to town the same day and has not been seen nor heard of since.

"Paradoxical as it may seem, it is to the larger towns, and perhaps to London more than any other, that the farmer of the future will have to look for replenishing the vanishing labour market of the country. The material out of which the depleted ranks are to be augmented will not be sought for at street corners but in the elementary schools."

Now what is the remedy for this state of things described so graphically, with such practical knowledge and long experience, by this Scotch land agent? The evil we have to face is the dead level of agicultural wages, averaging from 14s. to 16s. a week in many Midland counties, with small advances for certain periods of the year. This dead level of agricultural wages is caused by the dead level of agricultural work, and the dead level of agricultural work is caused by the dead level of agricultural education. The demand for skilled labour in agriculture, with the increased application of science and machinery, as in other forms of industry, increases every year, and this is certain, that, as the trade follows the flag, money will follow skill in agriculture, as in other industries. The wages will get better if the work gets better, and we must begin at the beginning.

The present condition of things is that the son of a farm labourer goes to a village school. He is taught a certain amount of elementary knowledge. He goes to a farm at the age of 12 or 13, or earlier, and is never called upon afterwards to open a book, or to make the slightest use of what he has learnt at school, hardly any of which has a direct bearing upon his daily life. The knowledge he has got is soon forgotten, as work on the farm is too continuous to allow him to make use of it, and he sinks down to the dead level of work and of wages, and remains there until in his old age he drifts into the workhouse. The remedy for this scandalous waste of public money, spent on a useless because unused education, is shadowed forth in the excellent introduction to the new Education Code published in the present year, from which the following is a quotation:—

"The purpose of the elementary school is to form and strengthen the character and to develop the intelligence of the children—and to make the best use of the school years available—in assisting both boys and girls according to their different needs to fit themselves, practically, as well as intellectually, for the work of life.

"With this purpose in view it will be the aim of the school to train the children carefully in habits of observation and clear reasoning, so that they may gain an intelligent acquaintance with some of the facts and laws of nature.

"Among the subjects to be taught in every public elementary school is: Knowledge of the common phenomena of the external world, with special reference to the formation of a habit of intelligent and accurate observation, and to the application of that habit—in conjunction with simple forms of experiment - in the daily life and surroundings of the scholars."

Under the new code special grants are to be given to boys for handicraft and gardening, and provision is to be made for longer or shorter courses in these subjects.

The new Education Code gives us the fertile suggestion that real knowledge means the knowledge begun at school and applied during the whole of life, without any break or gap. The nature study, which is begun inside the elementary school and is illustrated on the plot outside, prepares the boy for the garden and the allotment as well as for the farm. No one pretends that farming can be taught, or should be attempted, in the elementary school. Lord Reay, the last Chairman of the London School Board, in referring to nature study, said: "It is not desired to introduce a new subject into the curriculum; the intention is to make the living world the ground-work for other lessons." A boy who has been prepared in an elementary school for an agricultural life, has gone through the usual standards, and has, in addition, learnt thoroughly the object lessons which nature study in the schools, and work on the experimental plot outside the school, can give, has had the foundation laid upon which the further training may be successfully placed.

As the scheme develops, this further training will probably be given, partly in evening continuation schools and partly in higher elementary schools, where there will be provided—in the words of the code—"a sufficiency of science instruction, both practical and theoretical" . . . . "suitable to the circumstances of the scholars and the neighbourhood." The Cambridgeshire County Council have already made an admirable beginning in this direction.

At the age of 12 or 13 the boy would go on the farm. A lad well grounded in the elementary school, where nature study had been practically taught, would be accepted by many farmers as a valuable help for farm work, and here he should be given an intermediate scholarship, provided by the County Council. The farmer with whom he is placed should be carefully selected, and the agreement between the County Council and the farmer should contain a provision that, for so many hours a week, in all but the busiest times of year, the boy should be free to go on with the theoretical and practical training necessary to make a skilled workman of him. The arrangement should be elastic so as to suit the convenience and requirements of the farmer, varying with the various seasons of the year, so as to give the best training to the boy, with the least inconvenience to the farmer. For the shorter hours the farmer would naturally not give full time wages.

The wages paid by the farmer will be in proportion to the time given by the boy to work—the scholarship granted by the County Council would supplement the wages given by the farmer, and at the age of 18 or 19 the boy would be qualified as a skilled farm labourer, worth in

the labour market a considerably higher wage than the dead level of fourteen or fifteen shillings a week.

And now to leave the boy and to come to the teacher. It is absolutely essential that there should be a body of teachers fully qualified to give the practical instruction necessary. We must have teachers who are thoroughly able to teach nature study in elementary schools, and others equally qualified to carry on the training of the boy when he leaves the elementary school and goes on to the farm. Year by year greater facilities are being offered for the training of elementary and higher teachers in agriculture. As the demand becomes greater, the tendency will be for the supply to equal the demand. At each stage, from first to last, the teaching must be thorough and accurate as far as it goes, in order to give the results in skilled work.

The question naturally arises how are the farm students to be brought into contact with their instructors? There are only two alternatives. Either there must be teaching centres where the students are collected to meet the instructors, or the instructors must go to the farms to find the students. One plan may be more practicable than the other at certain seasons of the year and under certain changing conditions. The times, seasons, and conditions will vary. What is essential is that the teaching should be given by men who are thoroughly competent to teach to students who are determined to learn. Without this combination teaching and learning will be a hollow sham.

The subjects to be taught, as given by my friend the Scotch Land Agent, include elementary botany and chemistry as applied to agriculture; instruction in different breeds of farm stock; and some knowledge of the construction, mechanism, and use of farm implements (an extremely important part of the education of every skilled workman on any farm where machinery is employed). In addition to this he should know the elements of farm book-keeping; he should understand something about various kinds of crops and fruit-growing; and in manual work he should be thoroughly taught such things as hedging, ditching, and thatching. He should have some elementary but accurate knowledge of the common diseases of animals, so that he may see what is a serious ailment and what is not. With this kind of training the skilled farm labourer would improve his condition in two respects. First, he would be worth a better wage in cash; and, secondly, he would, by his knowledge, get more and better produce out of his small holding, his allotment, or his garden, as well as out of the farm. The result would be an improvement in his condition that would raise him far above the dead level wage-earner of to-day. And more than this: his children will be brought up, both boys and girls, in the atmosphere of nature study. Their childhood would be largely spent in the garden, and a good garden generally means a healthy home.

The apprenticeship of such a home as that would be the very best that a child could have. The father would be the best of teachers, and, by the time that his children went to school, they would be likely to learn quickly and readily everything that a school with an agricultural

side to it would teach them. They, in their turn, would become skilled workmen on the land.

The scheme summarised is then as follows:—

Nature study and experimental plots for the elementary school. Intermediate scholarships on farms to be held by boys who will work under the guidance of trained agricultural teachers. Last, but not least, practical help from farmers.

And now for the part which it is to be hoped that London will take in this scheme. Nearly nine hundred children are now boarded out outside the county. Of these many, after four or five years of country life, would gladly remain in the country, and their parents probably would be glad to allow them to do so, if only they could see a fair chance of bettering their condition. Their residence in the country has to a great extent unfitted them for a town life, and if this scheme is carried out, it ought to fit them for a country life. To let these children drift back into the London slums from which they have mostly come, is to waste and lose nine-tenths of the advantages they have got from their residence in the country. As it is, these boarded out London children are being fed, clothed, lodged, taught, and given medical attendance at the public expense of London. Surely it is worth while to give them in addition that practical knowledge which will make them skilled workmen in what is still the most important industry of our country.

The combination of the scientific farmer and the skilled workman would be invincible, and would raise agriculture to a greater pitch of prosperity than has ever been known in England. The question whether the farmers will pay a higher wage for greater skill can only be answered by experience. In every other industry greater skill is invariably accompanied by higher wages. The strong probability is that the same cause would produce the same results in agriculture. In proof of this there are now many farm labourers scattered up and down the country who have picked up their skill by their own efforts with difficulty and slowly, and are now earning more than the dead level wage of the district in which they live. It is even now a settled practice amongst successful farmers to pay higher wages for better work.

There are, no doubt, difficulties in the way of such a scheme as this, which it is foolish to ignore, but still more foolish to refuse to grapple with. There are deep prejudices to be overcome, changes to be made among classes of people who sometimes look upon any change in the light of an unmitigated disaster; but, looking abroad to other countries, and to Ireland, there are strong reasons for encouragement and for the belief that the time is coming, and coming soon, when agriculture will ally itself with science more closely than it has ever yet done, and when the farmer will acknowledge that really skilled work is cheap at the highest wage the worker can get in the open market.

No scheme for an agricultural education can be complete which omits the very important share that women should take in it. In Scotland and the north of England to-day, and in many parts of

Europe, women take their part in agricultural employment. In some countries their work is too heavy and becomes degrading. This could never be so in the case of highly skilled and adequately paid women employed as gardeners, fruit growers, or milkers, or as helping in the harvest fields, employment far more healthy and invigorating for women than much of the factory labour in which many thousands of women and girls are engaged.

Much has recently been said, and something has recently been done, in the promotion of co-operative agriculture. Every step taken towards the increase of the science of the farmer and the skill of the labourer will bring agricultural co-operation nearer, and will help to make agricultural distress a dismal memory of past times, which will never return again to England. The moral and material result of giving higher ambitions, and a better hope, to thousands of men and women who are now despondent, if not despairing, will surely be a reward amply sufficient for any one who will lend a helping hand, whether this be done by means of a Government department, a voluntary association, or by individual energy and enthusiasm, without which no practical reform can ever be carried to a successful issue.

Agriculturists and economists unite in telling us that there can be no financial short cut to agricultural prosperity. The great achievements of English farming, whether in the yield per acre of arable land, or in the breeding of stock, or in any of the other forms of agricultural success, of which English farmers have every right to be proud, have not been won by financial or political quackery. Foreign countries have shown us that the road to agricultural prosperity must be by an advance in the science of the farmer—whether he be owner or occupier; by an advance in the skill of the labourer; and by the adoption of some system of agricultural co-operation, which has proved so successful to small farming in Ireland, and to larger, as well as smaller, farming in many European countries. Agricultural co-operation will never be successfully introduced by merely copying some local application of any particular plan, but by an intelligent adaptation of the main principles by which success and prosperity have been won and maintained elsewhere.

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